

Liturgy: An Introduction

The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. ~ John 4:23-24

THE TERM "liturgy" is a Greek word that originally meant any work or service done in the name of the people. In the Christian Tradition liturgy refers to the Church's participation in Christ's work of salvation through her worship of God, proclamation of the Gospel, and active life of charity. This broad understanding of liturgy is reflected in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans: *"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"* (Rom 12:1).

In a narrower sense, liturgy refers to all the rites and ceremonies that constitute the Church's corporate worship: the Mass, celebration of the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (known by most as simply RCIA), and blessings. Because the Eucharist is the preeminent act of worship toward which all the other works of the Church are oriented, often when people speak of "the liturgy" they are speaking about the Mass.

Liturgy is a special kind of work or service that is rendered to God. The chief liturgist at every celebration liturgy is Christ himself, who as eternal high priest, pleads continuously on our behalf in the presence of the Father. The Church, brought together in faith by the Holy Spirit under the headship of Christ to give worship to the Father, offers her thanks,



Smoke of incense rising from a thurible (or censur) symbolizes the prayers of the faithful rising to God

praise, and love to God in union with Christ. God in turn blesses, sanctifies, and loves his people through his beloved Son by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Seen from above, liturgy is the work of the Blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the source of all blessing who through Christ and by the activity of the Holy Spirit sanctifies the Church. Seen from below, liturgy is the work of the Church which, as the Body of Christ united to her Head and, by the activity of the Holy Spirit, renders true worship back to the Father.

Jesus is always present in the liturgy of the Church as its principal actor. He is present in his Word, in his minister the priest, in the people gathered in his name, and in a unique way in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is his very body and blood, soul and divinity. In the liturgy Christ both signifies and makes present his own Paschal mystery, that is, the saving events of his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. Christian liturgy not only recalls these events but actually makes them present so that we may share in them by faith. Christ who, *"by a single offering ... perfected for all time those who are sanctified"* (Heb 10:14), makes the effects of his offering available to those called into the communion of the Church.

There is another reality happening in Heaven to which the liturgy of the Church is united. Jesus

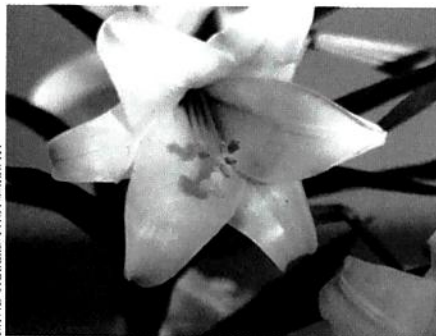
"In the sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery, we are united with the great multitude of Heaven worshipping the Lamb of God."

“The liturgical calendar transforms the weeks and days of the year into a perpetual celebration of the Paschal mystery.”

standing before the Father in Heaven offers himself eternally. In the vision of this Heavenly liturgy, Jesus is not alone but is joined by all the angels and saints of Heaven as they sing the “thrice holy” hymn of praise to God the Father and cry out: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen” (Rv 7:12). The sacramental liturgy and, more specifically, the Mass are foretastes of this Heavenly liturgy and a real participation in it. When we adore, sing praise, and give thanks in the sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery, we are united with the great multitude of Heaven worshipping the Lamb of God (see Rv 7:9-12).

While the celebration of the Eucharist is at the summit of the Church’s liturgy, the celebration of the other six sacraments also constitutes the core of the Church’s liturgical life. Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony, as well as the Eucharist, are all celebrations of the Paschal mystery made effective by the power of the Holy Spirit who is always present in the Church. Sacraments are powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. The sacraments effect what they signify, that is, they do what they symbolize. They are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (CCC 1131).

The celebration of liturgy not only sanctifies the People of God but also sanctifies time, both the calendar year and the time of each individual day. The liturgical calendar transforms the weeks and days of the year into a perpetual celebration of the Paschal mystery. The liturgical year follows the life of Christ and makes present the saving mysteries of his life. Advent lovingly recalls Christ’s coming in the flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation and anticipates his glorious return at the end of time. The Christmas season recalls the Lord’s birth of the Virgin Mary and his early manifestations as the Son of God made man. Easter



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Lilies are used by the Church as a symbol of the Resurrection

commemorates the Lord’s suffering, death, and Resurrection, the central mysteries that brought about our salvation. The Easter season that stretches for fifty days after Easter recalls the Lord’s appearance to his disciples after the Resurrection until the time of his Ascension and the glorious descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost. Lent serves as a time of preparation for the celebration of

Easter that disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the Paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own Baptism and through penitential practices.

Every hour of the day is also transformed by the liturgy of the Church in its daily office of prayer called the Liturgy of the Hours. This public prayer of the Church can be said individually or in a group and is organized around the key moments of the day (morning, evening, and night) so that the whole day is sanctified, making daily life a living prayer. The Divine Office, as it is also called, is structured by the Word of God, especially by the Psalms, which are a tremendous help when we struggle to express our adoration, praise, and thanksgiving to God. This prayer is pleasing to God and another treasure of the Church willed by Christ.

The Church’s celebration of the Paschal mystery is intimately united with her profession of faith. As the Church prays, so she believes. Her unity of faith is sustained by the unity of her celebration and worship. This unity is not a strict uniformity but instead incorporates the rich cultural diversity of peoples throughout the world. The Church’s ability to integrate these various cultural elements into her liturgical life while purifying them is a sign of her catholicity and greatness. It is also a source of enrichment and renewal for the life of the Church and bears witness that human culture can be redeemed as it is brought into contact with the mystery of Christ and used as a means to express it in liturgy.

(CCC 1066-1109, 1113-1130, 1135-1186, 1200-1206, 2698)

history of the mass

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ~ 1 Corinthians 10:16

FOR SOME, the Mass (The Celebration of the Eucharist) may appear as a confusing conglomeration of rituals, making it difficult to worship. This generates a number of questions. Where do all these rituals come from? Are they biblical? What do they mean?

"Father . . . look with favor on these offerings and accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek" (*The Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I).

More than anything else, the Mass is a sacrifice that re-presents (makes present again) the one single sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a memorial of his Passover; in fact it is often called the Sacrifice of the Mass. Before he was given up to death, Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. This took place during the Jewish feast of Passover when the whole People of Israel celebrate their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Taking the common elements of this feast (bread, wine, and the sacrificial lamb), Jesus substituted himself as the perfect lamb and changed the bread and wine into his body and blood. He did this in preparation for his supreme sacrifice of love on the cross that would make our salvation possible.

Along with the Passover, other Old Testa-

ment sacrifices serve as well to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ. Abel offered God the firstlings of his flock, and "*the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering*" (Gn 4:4). Abel's righteousness was pleasing to God and, out of envy, his brother Cain killed him. In a similar manner, the ruling body of the Jews, Jesus' own people, ensured Jesus' death.

Later, in the life of Abraham, God asked for the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. This was Abraham's most challenging and painful test of faith. Isaac was his only son.

Abraham, who loved God, went up the mountain to sacrifice his son out of obedience to the Lord. But an angel called out to Abraham: "*Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*" (Gn 22:12). Abraham's offering of Isaac reminds us of the perfect offering of Jesus, the only Son of the Father, on the cross. The once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus is re-presented (made present) every time we celebrate the Mass.

Another sacrifice God found pleasing was that of the priest-king Melchizedek, who offered bread and wine and called down a blessing upon Abraham. Jesus, who is our new and eternal priest-king, also chose to offer bread and wine at the time of the Last Supper. Included in this offering was a blessing that called upon the Holy Spirit to sanctify the Church.

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Statue of Melchizedek on the exterior of the Cathedral of Chartres, France, dating from the 15th century

The Mass and the Early Church

The Acts of the Apostles tells us a great deal about the early celebration of the Eucharist. By the time of Paul's preaching, there seems to be a definite practice of coming together to break bread on Sunday (see Acts 20:7).

Most of the early Christians were Jewish converts, and the way they worshiped in the synagogue shaped their celebration of Mass. The structure of Scripture readings and responses are adapted from the liturgy of the synagogue.

From a letter written about 150 AD, by a Christian philosopher named Justin, it is clear that the Mass had developed very early into its present structure. He wrote that the Christians gathered on the day of the sun (Sunday) and "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read" (Liturgy of the Word). After the "presider" exhorted the assembly to "imitate the good examples" of the readings (Homily), bread and wine were brought forward (Presentation of the Gifts) and prayers were said (Eucharistic Prayer). Justin wrote that the bread and wine were called Eucharist because "by the Eucharistic (Thanksgiving) prayer," this food is changed into "the flesh and blood of the incarnated Jesus" (Consecration). Next, "there is the distribution to each and the participation in the Eucharistic elements" (Communion). During the time of Justin, Christians were persecuted and sometimes killed because of their faith. Consequently, the liturgy or worship service was kept simple and the place of worship kept unadorned since they had to meet in secret.

A deacon lights the Paschal Candle in preparation for Mass during the Easter season

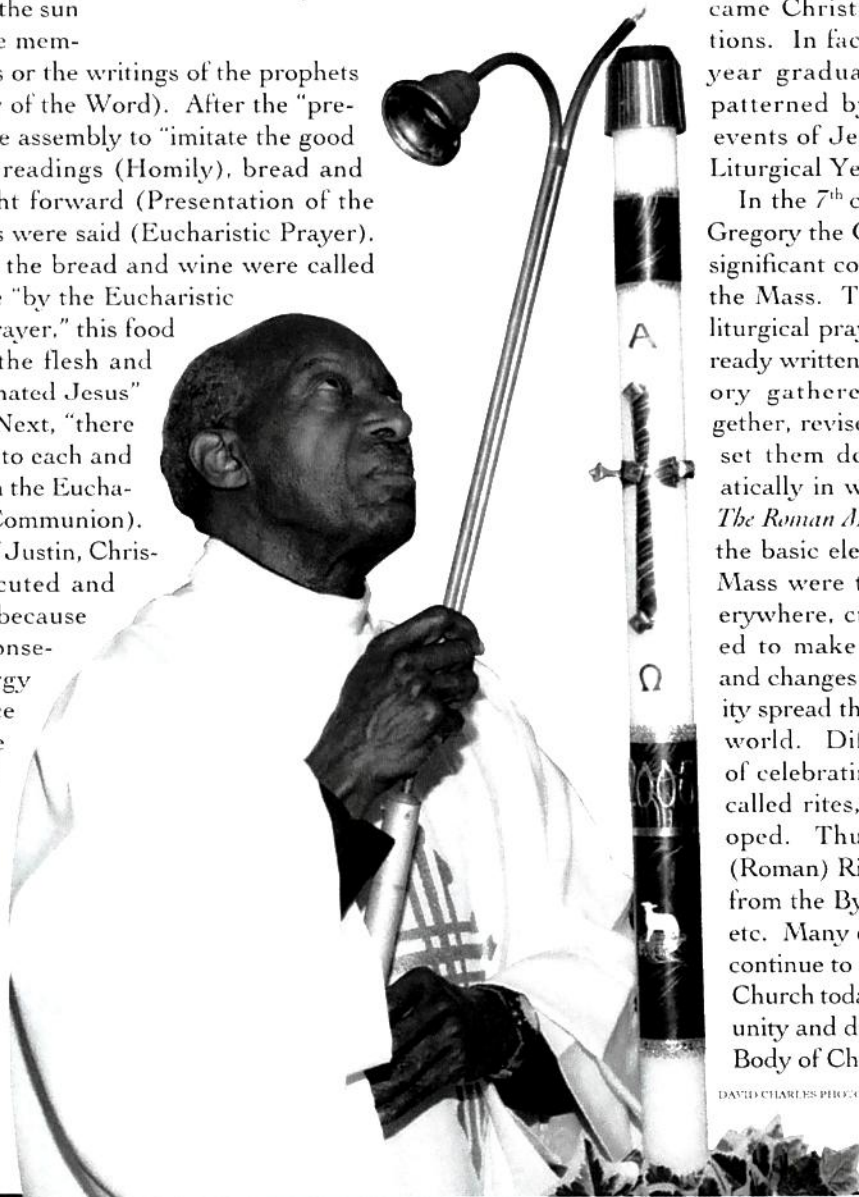
The Mass and the Middle Ages

Once Christianity was no longer persecuted and Christians were free to practice their faith openly, large public buildings called basilicas became places of worship. The Mass became more elaborate without alteration to its basic structure. In Rome, persons of honor and authority wore clothing that was made from fine materials and meant to display the distinction they held in society as public servants. With a similar understanding and authority, bishops, priests and deacons began to wear vestments to display their distinct roles in virtue of their office as servants of the People of God, the Church. Also,

days that had once been feasts in honor of various Greek and Roman gods were taken over and became Christian celebrations. In fact, the whole year gradually became patterned by the major events of Jesus' life (the Liturgical Year).

In the 7th century Pope Gregory the Great made a significant contribution to the Mass. Though many liturgical prayers were already written, Pope Gregory gathered them together, revised them, and set them down systematically in what is called *The Roman Missal*. While the basic elements of the Mass were the same everywhere, cultures tended to make adaptations and changes as Christianity spread throughout the world. Different ways of celebrating the Mass, called rites, were developed. Thus, the Latin (Roman) Rite is different from the Byzantine Rite, etc. Many different rites continue to survive in the Church today, as a sign of unity and diversity in the Body of Christ.

"The Mass developed very early into its present structure."



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The Mass and the Council of Trent

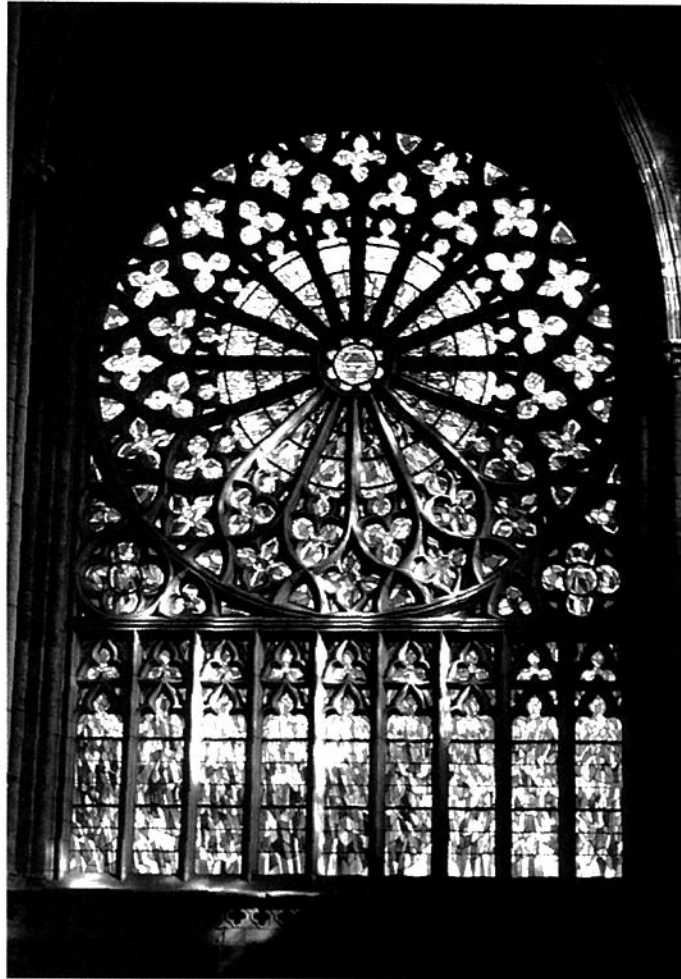
The Council of Trent (1545-1563), like other major Church councils, was a gathering of the bishops or their representatives with the Pope in order to discuss the issues of the day in light of Catholic teaching. This Council was convened to make clear what aspects of the faith the Protestant Reformers were rejecting and to restate the Church's official teaching.

Many of the reformers rejected the sacrificial nature of the Mass and disbelieved in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Council Fathers found it necessary to define the sacrificial nature of the celebration and to emphasize Catholic teaching that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist — body, blood, soul, and divinity —

under the appearance of bread and wine. This teaching led to a genuine reform of the liturgy that developed a disciplined order for the celebration of Mass called the Tridentine Mass. This form of celebration, which was highly structured and very beautiful, was intended to emphasize the tremendous holiness associated with celebrating the Eucharist and being in the presence of and actually receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The Mass and Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was convened to foster renewal and increase the vitality of the Christian life. With this aim in mind, the Pope and the



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which emerged from Vatican II has increased the participation of the faithful and, in many ways, has renewed the Church. Pope John Paul II has said that Catholics should give thanks for “the fact that the table of the Word of God is now more abundantly furnished for all ... for the increased participation of the faithful ... in the Eucharist ... for the radiant vitality of so many Christian communities, a vitality drawn from the wellspring of the Liturgy” (*Vicesimus Quintus Annus*). Like the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus, we, too, at the wellspring of liturgy hear him say, “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (Jn 4:14).

(CCC 1333, 1345)

bishops launched a reform of the liturgy. Many bishops around the world had expressed concern over a lack of participation in the Mass. In order to correct this, the Council Fathers decided, among other things, to allow the use of the vernacular (everyday language instead of Latin) in the liturgy, and mandated a more abundant use of Sacred Scripture. They also called for a revision in the *Roman Missal*, the book of prayers used at Mass, to include a wider variety of prayers.

Vatican II, like all other Church councils, recognized the liturgy as the principal source of power and grace for the Church. By keeping in mind the rich cultural traditions found throughout the world and by allowing for greater freedom in how the Mass could be celebrated, the liturgy

THE PARTS OF THE MASS

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.... When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. ~ Luke 24:27, 30



AT THE LAST SUPPER, on the night when Jesus was betrayed, he instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout all time until that day that he would come again. Through the celebration of the Mass, the Church remembers his death and Resurrection, brings the saving effects of his sacrifice into the present, and nourishes her people with the Paschal Banquet in which Christ is eaten and the heart is filled with his grace.

The Mass is a celebration of the Paschal mystery of Christ. The Paschal mystery refers to his saving work accomplished by his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension. A step-by-step walk through the Mass can help us understand how this central mystery of the faith is celebrated and made present every time the People of God gather to worship.

Opening Rites

Processional: The Mass begins with a processional.

The altar is revered by all in procession because it represents the table of the Lord. It is the place of sacrifice, the holy place. Those in the procession include the altar servers, reader(s), a deacon if present, concelebrating priests (if any), and the main celebrant who is the priest (or bishop) that will preside over the celebration. They process in where the people are gathered, make a sign of reverence toward the altar, and take their appropriate seats.

Greeting: "[W]here two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). The priest leads the people in the sign of the cross and greets them in the name of the Lord.

Penitential Rite: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:13). In order to celebrate the Mass worthily, the priest invites all those present to participate in the penitential rite, which the whole congregation carries out through a communal confession of sin and absolution from the priest. True worship

requires repentance of sin and reconciliation; we must be reconciled with God and one another. This rite can be carried out in several ways but the two most common forms are the Confiteor (which means "I confess") and the Kyrie Eleison (which means "Lord, have mercy"). Both prayers are our recognition of sin and plea for God's mercy. Confident that God never turns away a contrite heart and resting on the assurance of the Church entrusted with his mercy, the priest then leads the people in a hymn of praise.

The Gloria: "Ascribe to the Lord, O Heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy array" (Ps 29:1-2). Forgiveness of all venial sins, the people

are now ready to praise God with the great hymn called the Gloria. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:14). This is an ancient hymn of praise and thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will ever do for his people. In this way, those gathered unite themselves with those in Heaven who continually worship God in the same manner: "And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen'" (Rv 7:11-12). The Gloria is either

"The Mass is a celebration of the Paschal mystery of Christ."



Wheatfield at sunset

J. PETERMAN

sung or said on all Sundays except for the seasons of Advent and Lent, on solemnities and feasts, and on special, more solemn celebrations.

Collect: *"The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer"* (Ps 6:9). After the Gloria, the priest invites the people to pray, and together with him they observe a brief silence to place themselves in the presence of God and call to mind their petitions. The priest then prays the opening prayer, also known as the *collect*, which expresses the main theme of the Mass. The priest's final words of the prayer address a petition to the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The Liturgy of the Word

"Blessed ... are those who bear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:28).

Readings: *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"* (Mt 4:4). Christ is present when his Word is proclaimed, and his Word is food for the soul. Here we meet Christ at the Table of his Word. The Word of God feeds and instructs us and prepares us to receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. The **first reading** is usually from the Old Testament and is followed by a **response** from the book of Psalms in Scripture. If the celebration is a solemn one, a **second reading** from the New Testament other than the Gospels is read. Following these is the proclamation of the **Gospel**. The Gospel is especially venerated because it is an account of the life of the Lord and contains the message of salvation. Frequently, the book of the Gospels is carried in procession with candles, accompanied by the singing of an Alleluia verse. The people stand while the Gospel is read.

The Homily: *"I strive ... for all ... that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Col 2:1-2). After the readings,

the bishop, priest, or deacon explains these Scriptures and encourages reflection on the Word of God in order to prepare the people's hearts and minds for the Eucharist. He exhorts the people to live by the Word that gives life.

The Profession of Faith: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God"* (Jn 6:68-69). The Profession of Faith or Creed is a summary of all that the Church believes. It is an ancient formula that expresses the central truths of the faith. Every Sunday (and on other solemn feasts) the

Creed is prayed to remind those present of their baptismal declaration of faith and to unite the congregation as a community of believers preparing to approach the table of the Lord's Body and Blood. The Nicene Creed includes the phrase, "by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man," at which point the people bow (and on the feasts of Christmas and Annunciation they genuflect).

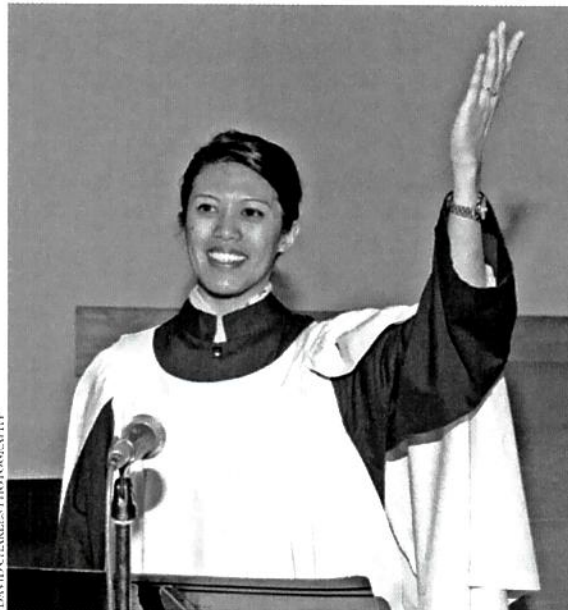
The Prayers of the Faithful: *"The Lord answers you in the day of trouble! ... May he remember all your offerings ... May he grant you your heart's desire ... and fulfill all your petitions"* (Ps 20:1-5). The Prayers of the Faithful or General Intercessions remind

the congregation that they are united with the whole Church in their concern for their own needs and the needs of others. Petitions are made at this time for the Pope and bishops, government leaders, the poor and the sick, and any other special needs present in the local community or the universal Church. There is often a time of silence so individuals can offer their own personal needs and unite them to the prayer of the whole Church.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

"This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (1k 22:19).

"Christ is present when his Word is proclaimed, and his Word is food for the soul."



A cantor leading the responsorial Psalm at Mass

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The Preparation of the Gifts: *"The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise"* (Ps 51:17). *"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"* (Rom 12:1). At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the altar is prepared and the gifts of bread and wine which will become Christ's Body and Blood are brought forward by the altar servers or representatives of the congregation. These gifts are received by the celebrant and are placed upon the altar. He blesses them, washes his hands (a sign of purification), and invites the people to pray that the sacrifice will be acceptable to God.

The Eucharistic Prayer: *"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come ... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption"* (Heb 9:11-12). The Mass is truly a sacrifice, a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Christ's death is made present in sacrament and thus the congregation is actually at Calvary, present at the foot of the cross. The Eucharistic Prayer contains many elements, but the most important is the consecration of the Eucharist, which uses Jesus' words of institution at the Last Supper. When the priest says these words, he acts in the person of Christ; at that moment, the bread and wine are changed into the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The Consecration is the most sacred act of the priesthood and from it springs the very source and life of the Church, the Eucharist.

The Lord's Prayer: *"And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him"* (Mt 6:7-8). After the Eucharistic Prayer, the people pray in the words that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is a petition for both natural and supernatural nourishment and again implores God for his mercy to grant forgiveness from sin so that

what is holy (the Eucharist) may be given to those who have been made holy through God the Father's love and mercy.

The Sign of Peace: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"* (Jn 14:27). The priest invites the congregation to exchange a sign of peace (either a handshake or kiss).

The Lamb of God: *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing"* (Rv 5:12). The *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") reminds the people that the Body and Blood of Jesus which they are about to receive is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Communion: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day"* (Jn 6:53-54). *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"* (1 Cor 10:16). To receive the Lord in the Eucharist is the greatest privilege of those in complete union with the Church. The Christian should approach the Eucharist humbly, and without any stain of serious sin; also the Church requires that a one-hour fast from food be observed by those going to Communion. After a sign of reverence (a bow), Holy Communion is received either in the hand or on the tongue. A time of meditation and thanksgiving follows this momentous gift.

The Concluding Rite

The concluding rite consists of the priest's greeting and final blessing, followed by the dismissal, which sends each of those present back to the world to do good works while praising and blessing the Lord: *"Go in peace to love and serve the Lord"* (*The Roman Missal, Concluding Rite*). The congregation responds: *"Thanks be to God."* The celebrant and those who had processed in with him then process out.

(CCC 1348-1355)

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